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Enforced Adaptation

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Abstract

Coryann Sayre woke to blessed silence. Then she remembered; there was cotton in her ears.

Additional Keywords

Fiction; Enforced Adaptation; V. W. Massie

ENFORCED ADAPTATION

by V. W. Massie



oryann Sayre woke to blessed silence. Then she remembered; there was cotton in her ears.

She rolled onto her back with a satisfying groan and spread her arms out wide to assess the dampness of the sofa. Pretty damp. She'd been having this nightmare lately, dreaming that she was waking up underwater, gasping for air. So she always checked...before she opened her eyes. Remembering the dream made her feel a trifle panicky and she struggled to shift the wet, clinging blankets from her legs. Ugh! How things stuck together when damp!

Free finally, she took in several deep breaths, ignoring the pervasive stink of waterlogged vegetation, and sat up. Her haunted, shadow-rimmed eyes roved quickly about the living room which was gradually brightening as dawn claimed the sky. Her beagle, Fred, lying on the rug next to the sofa, watched her with impassive but slightly questioning eyes. Coryann smiled a good morning. Fred, acknowledging she was rational at present, dropped his chin back down to rest on his forepaws.

Dare she look out the window? Suppose nothing had changed? She eyed the curtained window warily. It was impossible to be certain of anything from where she was sitting but she just didn't have the courage to walk over and pull the curtain to one side. Instead she reached up with both hands and defiantly tore the cotton from her ears.

Still raining. Damn.

She slumped into a boneless curve of despair and it was a good thirty minutes before she could bring herself to move again.

The toilet wouldn't flush and the shower wouldn't spray so she started on breakfast. No milk, so cereal was out. The flakes were probably stale anyway. Perhaps some toast. There was plenty of bread. Damp, as was everything, but edible. She took a slice of the bread and placed it in a skillet before lighting the coleman stove.

The streaming window beckoned, so, after balancing a kettle of stale water next to the skillet, she moved over to it. Grey day again. She ached to see the sun again, or maybe just a slice of blue sky.

Fred sauntered into the kitchen, his toenails clicking on the hard tile floor. His tongue drooped from the side of his mouth and his eyes seemed too wide.

"So, old boy," she sighed, "what's the weather report today?"

The beagle watched her in a measuring way, head cocked to one side. He whimpered once.

"Poor baby," Coryann crooned, glad her voice hid the incessant pitter patter of the rain. "You don't care much for this rain, do you?" She reached into the cabinet above the sink. "Are you hungry?" She showed him the can of dog food.

Fred whined and sat obediently, tongue preparing jaws. She fed him, pleased at the healthy way he attacked his food.

Her toast was burning but she managed to salvage it before it turned too black. She checked the water level as she munched her breakfast. It was all the way up to the worn floorboards of the back porch. It wouldn't be too long before the bottom floor of the house was flooded.

The generator finally died that afternoon about three o'clock. Coryann had been trying to listen to a fuzzy news broadcast, not that it could tell her anything new, of course, but it was a voice, a noise beside rain. She felt only mild annoyance. Damn rain.

She checked the calendar in the kitchen. Big black X's covered almost all of August, all of September, and up until today, the sixteenth of October. How long had it rained before she realized something weird was happening? Before she had started marking the calendar? A week? Two weeks?

She decided something right then; it was never going to stop. Plain and simple. It was going to rain forever. Feeling overheated suddenly, she changed into shorts and a shirt and stepped out the front door.

The water covered the front stoop and was surprisingly clear. Only the spattering rain prevented her from seeing, in detail, the concrete beneath her bare feet. Cautiously she descended the steps, feeling the warm soft water leap up and caress her ankles, her calves, her knees and thighs. Rain, hot as bathwater, traced loving fingers inside her collar and down her back. Gently it smoothed her face, coursing around her eyes as she surveyed what her world had become.



Water draped everything. Surprisingly, as it was downhill a way, she could still see the silver roof of her tool shed. Over to her left, her dark blue Chevette shimmered in a watery showroom. Only the shiny square of its roof remained above the water line.

Mrs. Gorchamp's house, just below Coryann's down the slope, was wavering in a murky tide. She recalled the day the old lady had come shrieking from that doorway, tearing her hair and cursing the sky. Coryann wondered what had happened to her. And all the other people, those who had walked happily into the water.

"Yo there!" The voice captured her flighty thoughts. "Are you managing all right, Coryann?" The wrinkled old man squinted through the drops from his sturdy little rowboat.

Somehow she found her voice. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine."

He was watching her closely, too closely, looking for the madness. She began to squirm.

"Are you sure? Want to hop aboard? There's a few people still on Priest Point. The Guard is trying to spread them out to other spots of dry ground. What little ground that's left, anyway."

"Oh, no, we're okay. It's bound to stop soon and then there'll be plenty of cleaning up to do."

"Hmph." He snorted softly. "I'll believe it when I see it." He poked at his yellow rain slicker lying

bunched and useless in the bottom of the boat. "Well, d'you need anything? Food? Fresh water? Kerosene?"

She shook her head, wishing he'd go away. "No, Fred and me are fine. We've got plenty of everything." She tried to smile his fears away. "We're on the first floor still, with the upstairs and the attic yet to climb to."

He grinned back at her, with his mouth, not his eyes. "Yeah, well, keep as dry as you can." He lifted the oars. "I'll try to come by when I can. Are you sure you'll be okay? You're awful young."

"Sure, don't worry. Besides, I'm a great swimmer. I can swim to higher ground if I have to."

He eyed the sky with a scowl. "If there is any, child. It's been raining a long time now, you know. Your place might just be one of the highest around."

She nodded thoughtfully and he left her alone with the tapping rain.

That evening she lit the kerosene lamp and stuffed her ears with cotton. Fred lay on the damp rug beside the sofa, panting softly. She smoothed his velvet head and curled up to read.

Two chapters later she began to itch. Especially her hands and feet. It was one of those itches that scratching only worsens. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she went into the downstairs bath and smeared a thick layer of calamine lotion over all the

affected areas. Probably some kind of fungus; she'd heard skin growths were a problem. The calamine seemed to help and she was able to concentrate on her book again.

Movement woke her in the early hours of the morning. The lamp had burned low and the pungent scent of the kerosene stung her nostrils. Fred was pacing back and forth and she soon realized why he was so upset.

Her hand, the right one, was submerged to the wrist in water.

She leapt up immediately, scrubbing the wet hand on her robe. Raising the lamp wick, she inspected her living room.

Flooded. Six inches deep.

"Well, Fred." His ears perked at hearing his name. "Looks like we're going to have to move upstairs after all."

She took the cotton from her ears and began gathering treasured momentos for moving up. It didn't take long; half an hour later she plopped the last box of food down on the bedroom carpet and smiled weakly at the watching Fred.

"I don't know why I'm bothering, do you?" She shrugged. "I guess old habits die hard." Sitting on the bed she ran slim fingers through her tousled hair. And saw it.

Racing to the window, she pressed her right palm to the glass. Grey dawn misted through, highlighting the thin, fragile webbing that had formed between her fingers. Pinkish red veins doodled across the web, emphasizing its frailty and fineness. She gasped in horror and poked at the membrane with a pointed fingernail. Lancing pain raced up her arm, making her feel weak and breathless. She examined the web. It was tough; she hadn't even fazed it.

Panicking, she darted her gaze around the abruptly unfamiliar bedroom, finally resting her eyes on Fred. He was smiling at her, head cocked to one side, and she saw that he knew. Whatever the hell was going on, he was aware of it and knew the reason why. It made her feel spooky, a dog being so...so informed.

Her mind flitted back to the webbing. What was causing the accelerated growth? Anxiously she removed her slippers and examined her itching feet. They looked okay, no sign of webbing. Wait. The skin between her toes did seem a little thicker. Or did it? She squeezed her head with both hands. Maybe she was imagining it all. Maybe this was a bad dream that would evaporate if she could just wake up...

Fred was still watching her. She stared back at him, terror inching its way along her spine. What,

exactly, was happening here? A low, anguished moan seeped from her.

Pale sunlight had appeared outside so she scrambled into shorts and shirt with trembling hands. Fred following, she headed for the stairs. Water, warm and soft, met her halfway down. She slowed her descent, wondering what to do. The walls of the house seemed to be closing in, suffocating her, and there was some new, terrible knowledge trying to overwhelm her. She had to get out.

With a fatalistic shrug of her slim shoulders, she allowed herself to slip into the water, gently, easily. It closed over her head, soothing as it smoothed. Pushing off with her feet, she swam through halls she had once walked. Luckily, the water was astoundingly clear; she had no trouble finding the front door. It gaped open, waiting for her.

Once outside, she dog-paddled over to the white, corrugated rain gutter and hauled herself up onto the sloping porch roof. Rain patted all around her.

Dripping water, she watched her new world; underwater world. There was, strangely enough, very little damage. This rain was a gentle one, no harsh currents to destroy, no raging winds to toss things. It had been a peaceful invasion.

A cat went by underwater, pausing to placidly frolic with a blade of swaying grass. A bird, nearby, darted among the branches of a leafy tree, its new, weblike wings propelling it effortlessly through this wet medium. Fred paddled by, grinned at her through the raindrops, and moved off. He bobbed his head and gobbled a passing bird/fish. She knew he would, and he did, stay under.

Gingerly she extended her webbed hand, swishing it easily back and forth through the liquid. The pressure against her webbing felt strangely pleasurable. Satisfying. Soon both hands were in, gently swishing to and fro. A new consciousness suffused her, and she was suddenly aware of where the rain originated. And of the race that had sent it. They would be a while yet; space travel takes a long time, after all. She and her kind were to make this world ready for them. Rosy-hued underwater palaces danced and sparkled within her mind.

She sat a moment longer, fixing the old into her memory. It was hard, this giving up one life for another. A few more moments of nostalgia and she dove in eagerly, hair cascading silkily behind her. The webbing allowed her to propel herself gracefully, swiftly along. Fred waited, tongue hanging happily, eyes gleaming with excitement. She rubbed his ears and smiled her understanding. They moved off together, slipping easily through the comfortable, soothing water. Ω